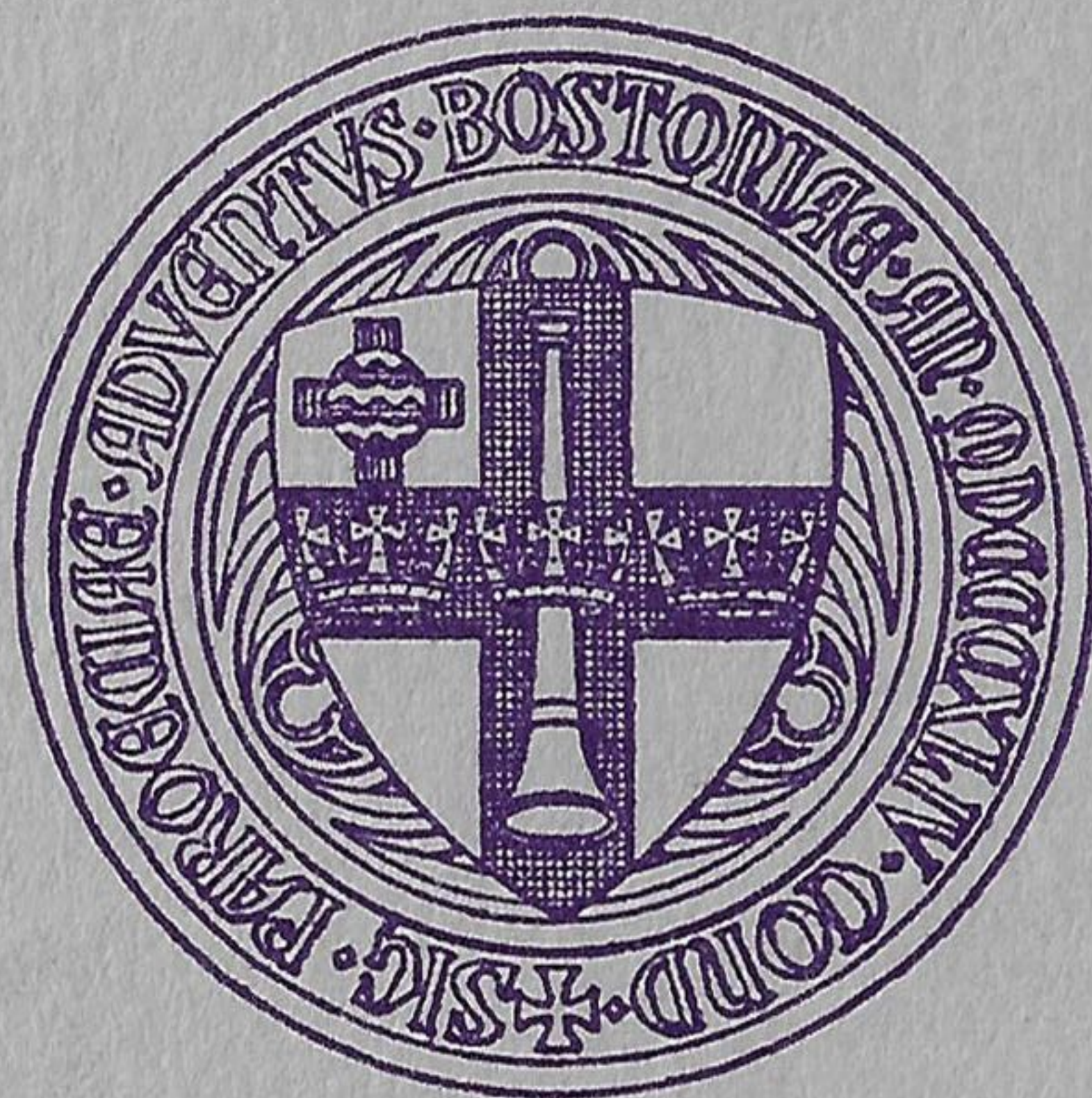


The Sacrament of Forgiveness



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ABOUT Confession two ideas are very generally held, one of which is old and untrue, the other modern and vague. Confession is a Roman practice and a Roman error, superstitious, contemptible, dangerous—this is the old untrue idea, and how widely and definitely it prevails! The other modern notion is opposed to it but, oddly enough, is often entertained by the very same people. It is very desirable, they say, to “tell everything” to a psychiatrist, a friend or a group, “to get it off your chest”. To confess is somehow good but “Confession” is somehow bad. Many sincere people would be glad to resolve this contradiction and get at the facts.

The truth about confession as a means of grace and of healing, as one of the spiritual resources of the Episcopal Church, needs to be repeatedly set forth, frankly and freely emphasized. The Church should make the Sacrament of Forgiveness a familiar, easily accessible channel of grace for every-

one—the ignorant, the unhappy, the mentally sick, the sinful, not only in emergencies but at all times. It needs to be explained more clearly to all men, churched and unchurched, particularly now when it specifically applies to the needs of war-torn lives.

In repudiating indulgences and other abuses at the time of the Reformation the Protestant Churches went so far as to deprive themselves completely of their most valuable instrument in the cure of souls. Was there ever a clearer case of throwing out the baby with the bath water? For over two hundred years six or seven generations of Christians in the Protestant countries have lived without this sacrament of God's forgiveness. Protestant churches simply lack the tradition, and the attitude of most Protestant laymen is one of incredulity, suspicion, and even amusement. Those who come into the Episcopal Church from evangelical Protestantism—from any of the denominations—almost inevitably have very definite prejudices against the use of the Sacrament of Penance—prejudices acquired during early formative years. They feel that auricular confession is essentially unnecessary since one can always confess one's sins directly to God. They regard it as a serious error to unfold one's private life to another human being, who presumptuously declares absolution of one's sins, a function which God alone possesses.

It is a convenient and comforting belief that direct confession of one's sins to God is sufficient. It is comforting because it makes few demands upon the individual. But do the majority of people who hold it bother actually to make a full and complete and sincere confession to God? Of course, one or two serious offenses may sufficiently arouse a sinner to pray to God for forgiveness from the very depths of his soul. But all too often even in these exceptional instances he who prays for forgiveness has as a primary motive a hope that the prayer will deliver him from the consequences of his sin. Both diffidence and pride tell the layman that confession is a queer practice, something to be used only with doctors of medicine, if at all. It is Romish; it is the way the "Catholic Church" gets a most dangerous grip on people and thus spreads "priestcraft." Moreover he feels a quite normal resistance to the surrender that confession implies (a resistance that is familiar to psychoanalysts in their patients). He rationalizes his own repugnance to the thought of humbling himself in such manner; it is not pleasant; it may even be dangerous to admit one's serious misdeeds to another human being; and who is this priest to think that the absolution is effective or his counsel valuable?

Pride and ignorance bind the individual; prejudice and sloth bind the churches. Few seminaries of the

Episcopal Church train priests in giving counsel. In some parishes, indeed in many, this sacrament is unheard of, or is regarded as a black practice, marking those who use it as eccentric or partisan. The average parishioner turns as from a strange odor when he comes upon someone kneeling somewhere in the Church, at the altar rail perhaps, "going in for" this medieval rite. Sometimes the sacrament must be administered secretly in the rector's study, so that the parish will not be "disturbed".

Our Anglican confusion of thought on this subject has been all too evident. It is still far from outgrown. The fallacious maxim, "I will not have a man between my soul and God," is often heard. Many still forget that we have—happily—countless men between our souls and God, beginning with the Great Mediator between God and man, the Man, Christ Jesus, and then Apostles, Martyrs and Confessors, bishops, priests and deacons, missionaries and Church school teachers, parents and friends, who constitute the living links between our souls and God, by Divine Providence. They forget, too, the clear teaching of the American Prayer Book, and the still clearer teaching of the English Prayer Book.

When the Church neglects to teach and to use the fulness of the Faith strange things happen. As with the power to heal the body so with her power

to cleanse the soul—her priests must exercise it or it will be used (and perhaps abused) by those outside the Church. The very stones cry out, the living waters break forth in a new place. In recent times various forms of non-sacramental confession unchurchly or semi-churchly, have appeared.

And much good may have been accomplished through the confessions, both open and private, of the Oxford Groups and also through Dr. Fosdick's Protestant Confessional, and similar institutions. An experience of relief comes from any kind of house-cleaning. The psychoanalyst's patient often feels purged after a session; those who made group confessions at Buchmanite house parties undoubtedly were lightened by their "sharing". After an intimate chat with a friend one feels better. Anyone can listen to a confession, and Anglo-Catholics recognize the good sometimes achieved by psychological "personal problem clinics", dramatic psychotherapy and the like, or even by talking things over with a wise and sympathetic friend.

Advocates of sacramental confession need not disparage these services, nor yet compete with them. Nor need they deny that a clinically-minded clergyman has a right to hold a therapeutic consultation in his private study. But there is one further important point. None of these devices or persons

or institutions has the right or power to give absolution. To absolve authoritatively in the Name of Christ, is a function validly exercised only by those who have received the Apostolic commission, the bishops of the Church and the presbyters ordained by them. The sacrament of Penance is a sacrament, an outward and visible sign; the instrument is the priest, and the inward and spiritual grace is absolution.

Unquestionably the use of this sacrament should increase. In the present human emergency, with our psychological problems, mental disease, and the various shocks and stresses of war, we need every means of health and of cure. The whole social framework seems to be disintegrating. The war has made ghastly clear, even to the shallowest, the most ignorant, and the most optimistic, that this world is sinful, this civilization sick unto death. Clutching at some shreds of Christian belief or practice men cry bitterly that the Church has failed.

But in the Church Christians must assert that man has failed, that the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth, that man is His creature, fallen but not lost; that the Incarnation and the Atonement declare and guarantee the forgiveness of sins. The Church can cope with the sins and the sinfulness which now at last men are driven to admit, "I believe in God

the Father Almighty—and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord—I believe in the Holy Ghost—the Holy Catholic Church—the forgiveness of sins.”

Our Blessed Lord began His ministry after the arrest of St. John Baptist by reiterating John’s message: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” In many of His miracles of healing, forgiveness of the suppliant’s sins seems to be part of the cure. All through His teaching runs the thread of man’s need for repentance, and, as we should expect, it continues through the records of the earliest Christian sermons in Acts and in the writings of the Apostles in the New Testament.

The power to absolve Christ left to His Church, and more particularly to His Apostles, the first Easter Day. “Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” These words follow immediately the words: “As My Father sent Me, even so send I you. Receive ye the Holy Spirit.”

The Church’s mission of absolution and reconciliation is not simply *like* the mission of Christ. It is the *same* mission. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables a priest of Christ’s Church to exercise this mission. Priestly absolution is both primitive and Catholic, though the rules by which it is exercised

have passed through a long, complicated, and most interesting development.

Christ is the great Reconciler. He came to reconcile man with God, and in so doing to reconcile man with man. And He left His Church as the true Fellowship of Reconciliation. In the Church, in vital union with the Mystical Body of Christ, man finds union and reconciliation with God through Christ. He also finds the deepest sort of union and reconciliation with his fellow-man.

To Episcopalians—to members of the Anglican Communion—it seems that our voluntary use of confession has certain advantages over the obligatory practice followed in the Roman Communion. To make the use of this means of grace obligatory often tends to a shallow and mechanical attitude toward it. Whether obligatory or voluntary, *the right use* of it should lead to a healthy, objective attitude toward sin. The rather common accusation that some people think they can sin, do penance and callously sin again, merely states an abuse. Instructed Catholics know that without sincere purpose of amendment God's gift of absolution cannot be received.

In the Anglican branch of the Church Catholic this voluntary and occasional sacrament is permitted by

our formularies, admitted, if shyly, in many parishes by many priests, though also militantly prescribed by others. It is welcomed by the devout, and is needed in countless emergencies. Most individuals outside the Roman Communion have to be fairly advanced in their spiritual development before they take any interest in it. The reason, no doubt, is the stiff-necked tradition of Protestant individualism combined with the Anglo-Saxon ideal of strict self-sufficiency. To abase oneself before God is quite enough. But a stiffneck, whether of Protestant or Anglo-Saxon origin, is of little use in times of personal stress and social upheaval. Few of us are able to hold our necks as stiffly as we once did, and most of us long for a more secure frame-work for our befuddled lives.

The states of mind that impel individuals toward confession are many—a sense of personal uncleanness, the need for clear perspective on one's family and social relationships, and the feeling of "sin in general". Self-discipline is another incentive, and a much stronger one than is commonly supposed. There is also a sort of motive that urges some particularly distressed mortals to use confession when it is explained to them. Neurotics who are taut springs of tension commit misdeeds without full consent of the will, but these are nonetheless a burden to them. To tell in confession of these com-

pulsions, and as much as the sufferer can of the underlying evil, has such marked therapeutic value that the French psychiatrist Janet was once led to write, "regular confession seems to have been invented by a genius of an alienist who wanted to treat obsessions." And there is more and more neurotic difficulty to be treated as war strains reveal the general weakness of family life, of moral code, and of personal religion.

Though some cases of mental illness should certainly be handed over to psychiatrists, moral disease can be treated by the priest in the confessional to an extent seldom realized by our experts in psychology and mental hygiene.

The secular sorts of confession range from psychoanalysis to the exhibitionism of various autobiographies, "true stories", and poetic outpourings on every level of taste. There are many vents for humanity's troubles, and most of them have some legitimate place.

Yet crucial differences will forever stand between consultation or confiding in a friend and the Sacrament of Penance. In confession the penitent cannot make an emotional idol of the priest. The rite is very nearly anonymous; at least it is as impersonal as possible; it is under the seal of secrecy and cannot

be discussed and enlarged upon later; it is performed in an atmosphere of holiness. And lastly, this sacrament, for one with a sufficiently developed faith, enables the creature to realize his true relationship to Almighty God.

Although a minimum of faith is necessary in the penitent, it is surely not necessary that confession be restricted, as for the most part it now is, to a few souls relatively advanced in their religious quests. One of the mysteries of this sacrament is the access of new strength and faith that comes when one yields himself to this instrument of Grace. If those with even a wavering faith take the first step they are likely to find that the faith they require keeps pace with their needs. The Holy Spirit not only cleanses, but at the same time confers strength, reassurance, and conviction.

Confession is good for the soul both because it has a therapeutic value in release of tension and in doing away with a morbid sense of guilt, and also because even in the case of venial sins it cleanses the soul's windows to admit more of the Divine Light. For these reasons alone if for no other, regularity in the practice is indicated. Inasmuch as no one can safely say he is without sin, the Sacrament of Penance should come to seem a normal part of the Christian life.

It should figure in the preparation of adult candidates for baptism and confirmation. It should be, as it is, considered a requirement for membership in various devotional guilds and societies. It should be, as it doubtless always was, especially in the Middle Ages when reading of books was not common, steadily used by simple, humble folk who need the nourishment of spiritual counsel. For average Christians it should be regular, in the "seasonal rhythm" of the Christian Year that is such ground for thankfulness in Church people.

An able teacher, a layman, recently made a study of confession from the testimony offered by a number of people who were simply asked to describe or to state what it meant to them, not in response to a questionnaire, but quite spontaneously. They all agreed that the experience was cleansing, and that it brought an access of spiritual strength. The sense of individual guilt is not the only goad to confession, it seems, but likewise difficulties in personal relations and the sense of corporate or social sin play a compelling part.

One person wrote: "I know that the inevitable strains of various human relationships would have bent and broken my unaided strength, my very limited wisdom, without this particular help". And another: "The sense of corporate guilt does increase.

We are caught in a society fundamentally unchristian. We are each and all sharers in the guilt of the world and confession can be my acknowledgment of this."

Another: "I go whether I have any definite sense of sin or not; I go, as I take a bath, not waiting for mud to accumulate, not waiting until I can see the uncleanness, but to have the dust of the world washed away, so that I may be truly clean and have a sense of well-being, so that, spiritually, I may come closer to Christ and let His grace come to me in the sensitivity and transparency of soul which He gives in the act of sacramental absolution."

And this: "When my self-centered feelings of grievance have been put through the cleansing of this sacrament, I've known again and yet again the blessed truth of the words, *The Lord hath put away thy sin.*" "At certain times, when a right course has been so hard, and the temptation to anger so great, that the path of duty grows perfectly hateful, confession and the honest search for one's own blameworthiness can so shift the weights (or the point of view) that courage to go on seeps in as rain into a well."

Surprisingly many people respond to the disciplinary appeal of Confession. They feel that

churches have been too soft with parishioners—have failed to uphold vigorous ideals. Most persons know that good things are hard to come by, and, in principle at least, favor some kind of discipline. Many penitents prefer to go to the same confessor regularly since he can more adequately discover the roots of their difficulties. Often the penitent feels tempted to go to some other confessor after committing some particularly serious sin, lest the regular confessor be quite shocked, which would hurt the penitent's pride. But after full reflection upon the nature of this sacrament, the penitent is almost sure to recognize the sin of pride and so make his confession to his regular confessor.

Whatever criticism may be directed against the Sacrament of Penance it cannot be denied that it brings a greater sense of God's nearness than does confession to God in private. This reaction does not come because the penitent is unfolding his past to a fellow-man. When we admit any past wrongdoing to a friend we feel free to go only as deep as we wish. Not so in the confessional, for there we are in the presence of God's priest who has been given a definite authority. Anything less than complete honesty becomes sinful for it would be failure to surrender completely to God.

After the confession proper and the summing up, known and treasured by the initiate—"for these

and all my other sins which I do not now remember . . . I humbly ask pardon of God, and of you, Father, absolution, penance and counsel", comes the most significant part of the sacrament of forgiveness. Pointing out that Our Lord has given to His apostles and their successors the authority to remit sins, the priest goes on to say; "And by His authority committed unto me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost". He is not simply one human being consoling another, but an official representative of the Church. The penitent can accept this absolution whole-heartedly since, indeed, Christ did authorize His ministers to forgive sins. The penitent knows that the absolution is from God. Then the penitent looks for counsel from the priest, who will tell him how to avoid repetitions of past failures. It is a brief message, through the priest, from God. It need not be connected with any of the sins confessed but like the prayer or hymn or passage of scripture given as penance the counsel may be some bit of the teaching of Jesus or a helpful thought to carry away into daily living.

Then the priest sends the penitent forth: "Go in peace; the Lord hath put away all thy sins." The confession has been a real strain upon the penitent, but now all that is past. He can go forth with an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude. He

has been restored to full fellowship in the Church; he is free now to direct all his energies toward present and future problems.

Self-examination, confession, absolution, counsel, penance—but these are not quite all the benefits derived. Though the penitent is free from his past sins there will come again temptations to swerve from following God's will. Now one of the most effective checks upon yielding again to sin is recalling the unpleasantness of the past confession and the fact that once more it will be necessary to report to God's priest. And so the force of the temptation may die out and new courage to persevere in the Way grows up. Thus the sacrament of forgiveness not only restores spiritual health, but it also helps to keep the soul in a wholesome state. And gradually the penitent discovers that a very real change has taken place within him, for the satisfying of his own selfish desires becomes negligible and the following of God's Will the primary aim of his existence. This growth in grace is summed up in the term "amendment of life."

By our sins we not only offend God but we injure the Body of Christ. Confession of our sins is due not only to God but to His Church, the Body of His Son. The Church, the vehicle of Christ's divine purpose, which He founded and uses in spite of the

weakness and sin of its human members, the Church must receive our confession, and bestow absolution in the Name of Christ. Repentance is this bringing of our sins to God.

And repentance is integral to the Christian way of life. In fact penitence is the absolutely right response of fallen man to the love of God, the response which is suited both to man's condition and to the attributes of God. St. Francis could repeat all night "my God, what art Thou? And what am I"? Our Lord's words of forgiveness surely mark repentance on the part of those whom He healed. How else but by repentance can the right relationship between the creature and a just and good Creator be established or restored? Penitence is a condition of the whole man resulting from a true vision of God and self. This true relationship, seen even dimly or in glimpses, gives us some measure of humility. The vision of God impels to the sacrifice of self. That process of self-surrender is what Christians call repentance. It is not something that God arbitrarily demands of man; it is man's only road to God.

Repentance means killing the pride of self, undergoing a kind of death. Yet Christian penitence is something very different from morbid introspection, because it comes not from ourselves but from

the vision of God. It is the high point of a permanent and normal state in which we are to live, and its fruit is healthy-minded activity in the service of God and man. When we go out of church after confession, pardoned, absolved, cleansed, relieved, we know a joy, a vigor, a power such as can only be experienced; it cannot be described.

The self-surrender of confession and the actuality of the act earn it an important place in sacramental Christian living. As Baptism is birth in Christ and as Holy Communion nourishes the soul, so the Sacrament of Penance cleanses the soul. Thus it is constantly a means to healthy life in God. It shows us ourselves in relation to Him, giving us needful self-knowledge. It makes vivid and effective the Forgiveness of Sins, restores us to the Communion of Saints, and gives courage and grace to seek anew in our own lives the life everlasting.

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